

Zone 1: Mexico (including Baja California)

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1 Profile of Zone:

This survey refers only to rock art sites in Mexico, including the Baja California peninsula. It does not include Central America, or other adjoining regions. Although existing political borders have no relevance for earlier times, separate treatment for Mexico is justified by its distinctive archaeological tradition and particular legal, constitutional and institutional framework.

In terms of continental prehistory, modern Mexico occupies a strategic location at the neck of the North American continent, an unavoidable passage in the peopling of Central and South America, and also the ‘Mesoamerican hearth’, a key region in the independent domestication of the New World plants and animals which sustained later Mesoamerican civilizations. These circumstances give Mexican archaeology a global significance and provide a rich set of comparative problems for which rock art is relevant and valuable archaeological evidence.

Rock art manifestations are widespread throughout Mexican territory. They occur in widely diverse natural settings in both open air and sheltered locations and include petroglyphs, rock paintings, mobiliary artifacts, and geoglyphs, as well as monumental sculpture and paintings associated with some major Mesoamerican centers. They also appear to span many millennia, from early hunter-gatherer occupations up to Spanish colonial times, although not to the present. Although some Mexican indigenous groups are known to have produced rock art in the historic past, none do so today.

2 Links with other zones:

Rock art manifestations in Mexican territory are continuous both northward across the U.S.-Mexican border and southward into Central America. To the North, specific shared rock art styles and traditions include Jornada Mogollon in the upper Rio Grande valley and Hohokam rock art along the Arizona/Sonora border. More broadly, many rock art motifs are shared between the Mexican portions of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts, the Baja peninsula and the rest of the North American Great Basin. Other motifs are shared with the so-called “Southeast ceremonial complex” present at sites in the lower Mississippi valley and south central Great Plains (Spiro, Oklahoma). What these similarities mean is one of the great challenges facing North American rock art studies.

Likewise, rock art traditions associated with the Maya region in southern Mexico extend southward in the Central American isthmus as far as Costa Rica. Other traditions may reflect the late prehistoric movements of Uto-Nahua peoples into Central America, especially the rock art of Ometepe Island (Nicaragua) associated with the arrival of the nicaraos.

The intensity of all these linkages is obviously variable and time-factored, but the nature and timing of these linkages have not been fully explored. Equally unexplored are connections between Mexican rock art and the Caribbean islands. Although some shared motifs are immediately obvious, especially in Cuba, none of them are culturally definitive, and archaeological evidence for contacts of any kind remains elusive. Even more important (and elusive) are the linkages of those motifs whose distribution extends from one end to the other of the Americas.

3 Known Sites:

As of 2005, a total of 2839 rock art sites are identified in Mexican territory, out of a national total of some 37,000 archaeological sites registered by the National Registry of Monuments and Archaeological Zones. The number of recorded sites has increased dramatically during the past 15 years. Up to 1991, only 644 sites had been identified. The latest figure represents an increase of 619 sites, or 28%, during the past five years, and this total is still understated due to bureaucratic delays in the registry process and limited field exploration in some areas.

Rock art sites are found in every Mexican state, but the latest increase reflects the results of more intensive field surveys in several states, particularly in northern Mexico. In the period (2000-2005), new site registrations were highest in Nuevo León (138 sites), Coahuila (78 sites), Sonora (33 sites), and Chihuahua (28 sites). In West Mexico, the states of Nayarit (50 sites), Michoacan (36 sites), Guerrero (30 sites), Jalisco (23 sites), and Sinaloa (13 sites) show significant increases. Because of its small area, the increase in the Bajío region and the Valley of Mexico is also notable, the state of Hidalgo (31 sites), DF/state of Mexico (19 sites) and Querétaro (12 sites). By way of contrast, the states in southern Mexico show only minimal increases in site registrations, due in part to limited exploration in more adverse environmental conditions.

The greatest geographical concentration of rock art sites continues to be in the Baja California peninsula with 815 sites, or 29% of the national total, but more recent surveys reveal a similar concentration of rock art in northeast and north central Mexico -Nuevo León (348 total sites), Coahuila (304 total sites), and Chihuahua (154 sites) for a total of 806 sites (or 28% of the national total). Although rock art occurs in all regions of Mesoamerica now part of Mexican territory, more than half of the registered rock art sites in Mexico are located in five northern border states.

Due to the size of the sample and the complexity of the phenomena, it is not possible to provide detailed information about each Mexican rock art site. Readers are referred to the bibliographic summaries in Murray & Valencia 1995 and Murray et al 2003 for additional information. In this report, we will generalize about conditions in order to cover the topic and limit comments about individual sites mainly to those with OUV (outstanding universal value) potential.

4 Declared and Potential World Heritage Sites:

All rock art sites in Mexico are part of the national patrimony and receive formal legal protection under the Mexican constitution. Many are also well-recognized elements of the local and regional setting, but the following sites have exceptional characteristics which merit special consideration.

A. Declared World Heritage Sites:

Sierra de San Francisco (Baja California) (1998): Major concentration of Great Mural style rock paintings in the central Baja peninsula.

B. Sites included in the Tentative List:

Boca de Potrerillos (Nuevo León): major petroglyph concentration of hunter-gatherer rock art (est. 6000-8000 images) associated with an archaeological zone extending over 6 km², and representing at least 8000 years occupation of the site. The site has a natural orientation to the cardinal directions and functions as a solar horizon calendar. At least four styles of petroglyphic representation have been identified (Valadez 2005). (nominated for inclusion as a cultural area)

Pinal de Zamorano (Querétaro): this is a sacred mountain for the indigenous groups of the region located 50 km. east of the state capital. Various rock shelters and exposed rock faces are painted, principally with a type of anthropomorph found only in this area, but also zoomorphs and to a lesser extent, geometrical figures. So far 46 rock art sites with hundreds of images have been located. (nominated for inclusion as part of a natural area)

C. Some Potential World Heritage Sites:

San Rafael de Los Milagros (Coahuila): extensive petroglyph concentration on the shore of the now-extinct Laguna de Mayran and adjacent to major federal highway about 100 km. from the state capital. Hundreds of carved rocks are distributed within six sub-areas. Elaborate geometrical motifs predominate, but anthropomorphs, fitomorphs, and zoomorphs are also found (Gonzalez 2005).

La Proveedora/La Calera (Sonora): major petroglyph concentration located 12 km. from Caborca, Sonora on a series of hills. Hundreds of rocks are carved with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and geometric designs, including some very elaborate and complex ones, in direct association with an archaeological site attributed to the Trincheras culture (Quijada 2005).

Las Plazuelas (Guanajuato): located just outside the city of Pénjamo, Guanajuato, this site is currently open to the public and under I.N.A.H. protection. It was a major late Classic and early Post-Classic (750-1200 A.D.) centre, and more than 1400 petroglyphs have been found within the area, principally spirals, dot figures and scale models of architectural features, which are the most notable carvings at the site (Castañeda 2000).

Pila de los Monos (Nayarit): located four kms from the Huichol community of Huajicori, Nayarit, this is an important sanctuary whose petroglyphic carvings are reflected in the natural pools of water of the Arroyo Chiote. Motifs include anthropomorphs and solar representations as well as

sacred peyote plants and geometrical figures of great complexity and variety. This is a pilgrimage site still visited by the local Huichol groups (Zepeda 2001).

Juxtlahuaca/Oxtotitlan (Guerrero): these caves are located near Mochitlán and Chilapa, Guerrero respectively and contain polychrome paintings in classic Olmec style, with the jaguar as its central motif. Other figures include a serpent and richly attired personages, possibly related to rain, water and fertility rituals. These sites receive official protection.

Chalcatzingo (Morelos): considered by archaeologist David Grove to be “the oldest sacred mountain in Mesoamerica”, this prominence, located in the state of Morelos, is adorned by low-relief Olmec style rock carvings with the jaguar as their central motif. 35 carvings in all have been registered in three spatially separated zones of the mountain. The associated archaeological site is dated to 700-500 B.C.

Loltún & other cave sites in the Oxkutzkab sierra (Yucatán): Loltún is the largest of a series of gallery caves in the Puuc hills containing Maya paintings (and some petroglyphs) corresponding to the Late Preclassic, Classic and Post Classic periods. They were first discovered in the late 19th century and present significant examples of Maya glyphic writing and iconographic motifs (Stone 1995; Strecker & Stone 2003). Petroglyphs at Loltún may be attributable to an earlier preceramic occupation of the cave between 9000-3000 A.C.

A number of other sites might be included in this list, but they are still under study and it is too early to make a fair and full evaluation. These include: Cerro de Chiquihuitillos, Presa de La Mula and Icamole canyon, in the state of Nuevo León; El Pelillal and Narihua, in Coahuila; Cerro de los Chichimecas, near La Piedad, Michoacán; Sierra de Guadalupe, Baja California Sur and the Victoria site in the northwest part of Guanajuato state, among others.

5 Existing Documentation:

The National Registry of Monuments and Archaeological Zones (Registro Público de Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas) is the central collection point for data and statistics on rock art sites. It has maps and aerial photographs of the entire country in both digital and physical formats. Individual site records are available in a data base which is regularly updated. Photographs and drawings (on paper) of sites and motifs are on file, and recently a three-dimensional map of site locations has been generated which will soon be made available to researchers. The archive of the Archaeological Council (Consejo de Arqueología) has official reports on all projects carried out since the 1970s; these reports can be consulted by researchers two years after they have been submitted and approved by the Council.

Many other visual records are stored in INAH regional offices, museums, university library collections, and in the study collections of private researchers. The INAH regional offices, in particular, contain information derived from inspections, salvage projects, and follow-up of public reports which do not reach the Archaeological Council. Each INAH center sets its own policy about consultation of these documents, but in general, this is open to any researcher associated with an established institution.

Because of the information they contain, all archaeological files are restricted for the general public.

6 Research:

In recent years, rock art has become a regular part of Mexican archaeological research. Since most research on it is done by professional archaeologists, they relate its styles and traditions to known pre-Hispanic cultures and their associated artefacts. These relationships range from projectile point types to Mesoamerican writing styles and use a diverse range of theoretical approaches and methodological tools. Research is also organized according to geographical regions, with rock art being especially relevant for North Mexico.

At present, no Mexican indigenous groups produce rock art, and in most cases they claim no knowledge or interest in it. Nevertheless, some rock art sites are still visited and used ritually by them on a regular basis and must be considered in some sense as “sacred” within modern Native American cultural traditions. These include Huichol ritual pilgrimage sites in the states of Nayarit, Jalisco, and Nuevo León; the Pinal de Zamorano and other ritual sites associated with the Otomí cultural tradition in Querétaro; as well as sites in the Zapotec area of Oaxaca and among various Maya groups in Chiapas.

Although ethnographic analogies have attractive potential for illuminating Mexican rock art, they have not been systematically studied, nor have modern ritual traditions been used to contextualize the rock art.

7 Protection:

The archaeological patrimony is considered of public value and is property of the nation. Its study, conservation and cultural use is controlled by the State under the Federal Monuments and Archaeological, Artistic and Historic Zones Law (Ley Federal sobre Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas, Artísticas e Históricas), enacted in 1972. Under this law, patrimonial responsibility is shared between the three levels of government (federal, state, and municipal) and is exercised by the I.N.A.H. for all cultural patrimony dated prior to 1900, and by the I.N.B.A. (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes) for all later works. Archaeological research, conservation and public use are governed by several internal ordinances and regulations, such as that of the Archaeological Council and the Regulations for Archaeological Research in Mexico.

At present, a number of state governments, including the states of Mexico, Veracruz and Yucatan, have passed patrimonial laws of their own, all following the same lines as the 1972 federal law, and formed their own cultural institutes and research centers. The present trend is to open up archaeological activities of all kinds to the states, and even in some cases, to the municipalities.

Effective protection of rock art is in the hands of the Federal police based on the constitutional powers of citizen denunciation to the responsible I.N.A.H. authorities. Such threatening actions are rarely (if ever) taken and real protection depends on more informal and circumstantial conditions peculiar to each site. Ultimately, protection rests on civic responsibility. All Mexican

citizens know that archaeological remains of all kinds belong to the nation. This translates into a civic duty to respect and protect them and report any damages to the responsible authorities.

By providing means to register materials in private hands, the nation accepts and promotes citizen custody of the archaeological patrimony, but formally restricts its ownership to the federal government and denies its commercial value by limiting the right of sale. Unfortunately, these legal provisions have not prevented the growth of an active clandestine market for “patio” petroglyphs which has resulted in massive damage and theft at some sites.

8 Conservation:

Although the I.N.A.H. has a conservation laboratory and training program in Mexico City, these are mainly dedicated to other archaeological materials than rock art.

Specific rock art conservation projects have been carried out only at the existing World Heritage site of Sierra de San Francisco (Baja California) as part of the management plan for that area in collaboration with the Getty Foundation in Los Angeles.

9 Site Management:

At present, the only Mexican rock art site with a fully implemented site management plan is the Sierra de San Francisco (Baja California). Nevertheless, limited protection is provided by municipal and state authorities as well as private land owners who control access to sites on their properties.

Additional control is provided through designation of sites as official “archaeological zones”, in which case the I.N.A.H. assumes formal land ownership of an archaeological site and specific responsibility for its conservation and management. Rock art manifestations are found within a number of officially protected archaeological zones (some noted above), but at present, the only zone officially so designated in order to protect rock art is Boca de Potrerillos (Nuevo León), where a 6 km² area was ceded to the federal government by the local ejido.

At this site, access to part of the archaeological zone is controlled by a small on-site museum within a fenced enclosure and facilitated by a trail network. Surveillance is provided by a permanent custodian who registers visitors, but is limited to official hours and still gives uncontrolled open access to that part of the site lying outside the fenced perimeter. Increased visitation over the last few years has provoked some additional damage to the rock art and raised new site management issues, such as provision of overnight camping facilities, food services, and paved access from the nearby federal highway.

Other rock art sites receive protection because of their location within natural reserves, such as national parks, wildlife refuges, historical monuments, and including already designated World Heritage sites. In some cases, they may be located in recreation areas used by the community and receive some protection from local residents, but in general damage risks are directly proportional to the frequency of human visits. The only well protected sites are the ones rarely if ever visited. Urban visitors tend to vandalize rock art sites and mark them with spray-painted

graffiti, whereas rural people more often dig pits in search of buried treasure or view the stones on which rock art is placed as good building material for fences or other constructions.

10 Main Threats:

Although natural factors, such as river flooding and volcanic activity, have the potential to affect many sites, the principal threats to Mexican rock art sites are all anthropogenic and broadly relate to changes in modern land use and access, particularly:

- development projects, including highway and pipeline construction, new water reservoir and hydroelectric projects, beach and shoreline modification, among others;
- urbanization, including new sub-divisions, associated industrial districts and urban infrastructure construction;
- rapidly expanding use of all-terrain off-road vehicles of all kinds capable of providing access to previously isolated locations; and
- changes in tenancy and land use derived from the privatization of ejido and communal lands.

Given the large number of sites in Mexico, centralized control of potential threats, even at the regional or state level, is very difficult and many factors contributing to damage go undetected. The loss of important sites, such as Samalayuca (Chih.) and San Bernabé (N.L.) is attributable to conflicting interests which prevented any effective salvage intervention.

Conclusions

Site recording is complete (or very nearly so) for most of the rock art sites which might be considered for World Heritage nomination. In most cases, the site documentation exists in more than one media format, although digitalization of these records within a unified data base is still in process.

Increased visitation at nearly all sites strains the limited resources of the agencies responsible for rock art protection and has led to a slow but steady deterioration in their physical condition. In some places, this has reached the level of alarming and irreversible destruction, but at other sites, prudent and opportune intervention is still possible and can ensure their preservation for future archaeological studies.

Consideration for World Heritage status is inevitably linked to a long-term commitment to increase research activities and protective measures at the sites so designated. Improved access and provision of visitor facilities imply infrastructure investments, but human resources are perhaps the most limiting factor at present.

The value of rock art for understanding Mexican prehistory is still largely unexplored, but attracts the interest of a new generation of Mexican archaeologists.

See illustrations Annexe IV: page 216

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Current Status The Baja California Desert remains partially intact, despite intensive human activity (Castellanos & Mendoza 1991). There are two federal protected areas, including El Vizcaño, the largest protected area in Mexico. A number of areas important for bird conservation have been identified within this ecoregion, including San Quintin, Bahía Magdalena-Almejas, Complejo Lagunar Ojo de Liebre, Complejo Lagunar San Ignacio, Sierra La Giganta, Sierra San Pedro Martir (Benitez et al. 1999). **Types and Severity of Threats** Livestock ranching, salt extraction, and hunting are the principal